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SUBJECT: VIETNAM: FIRST NATIONAL HOUSE CHURCH REGISTERED

¶1. (SBU) Leaders of the Danang-based United World Mission Church (UWMC) told us on September 15 that the national Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA) had issued nationwide registration for their organization. The date of the CRA promulgation was September 1, 2006, although HCMC authorities only received formal notification on September 15. (The UWMC had applied for registration soon after Vietnam's legal framework on religion came into effect in March 2005.)

¶2. (SBU) We subsequently spoke with our CRA contacts, who explained that the GVN decided to accelerate the process and register the UWMC nationally, despite the fact that local-registration had not yet been completed. The GVN decided to take this step as some jurisdictions were dragging their feet due to the "lack of awareness of local officials." (The UWMC has a robust house church presence in the Central Highlands, especially in the province of Kontum. We have received some recent reports that a few UWMC house churches in Kontum and in Dak Lak province continued to face some harassment.) According to the legal framework, the UWMC is eligible to apply for legal recognition after one year of "stable operation."

¶3. (SBU) A CRA official told us that the UWMC has been registered in the 14 provinces and cities in which it currently operates, including all the provinces in the Central Highlands. The CRA also has told us that national-level registration has been granted for a small Buddhist sect Tu An Hieu Nghia (the Four Gratuities), based in the Mekong Delta's An Giang province. On September 27, the CRA will register a second Buddhist sect based in HCMC. Reportedly, following these three "pilot" national-level registrations more are to follow, including the Baha'i based in HCMC and a small Cao Dai sect.

¶4. (SBU) The HCMC CRA noted that it does not expect to issue any additional city-wide registrations in the next two months, pending the completion of ongoing registration efforts at the local level. Our contact noted that once local level registration was granted for a particular house church, that church would have legal rights to operate, even if its parent provincial organization had not yet been registered by the city. Our contact added that all Protestant house church organizations based in HCMC have been invited to register under this plan, including the Mormons and the controversial house church group of Mennonite Pastor Nguyen Hong Quang.

¶5. (SBU) Comment: The national registration of the UWMC is significant and positive development. It marks the first national-level legalization of any Protestant organization since the recognition of the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam in ¶2001. It also is a departure from the bureaucratic approach the CRA had taken on registration. Until now, the CRA had insisted that all local-level and provincial-level registrations be completed before national registration could be contemplated. The UWMC, non-controversial politically and based in Vietnam since 1922, was a safe start. At this point it should be clear to all local officials -- even in harderline areas of the

Central Highlands -- that the UWMC is off limits for harassment.

Other groups that have applied for and await registration approval includes the Mormon church. The registration of the UWMC should encourage other house church organizations to accelerate their registration efforts. End Comment.

WINNICK